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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policy makers, as well as teachers, this digest examines the current state of humanities instruction and the evolving place of humanities in the high school English classroom. The digest first explores differing definitions of the humanities, and discusses reasons for the decline in emphasis on humanities instruction in public education. It then explores the role of the humanities in the English classroom, and presents several ways in which multidisciplinary techniques are used to incorporate the humanities into English instruction. The digest also discusses ways in which a thematic approach can be used to explore the humanities in the English classroom. A brief list of references is included. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

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Humanities in the English Classroom

Study of the humanities has experienced an alarming decline in America's high schools (Bennett 1984; Finn, Ravitch, and Fancher 1984). This digest looks at the current state of humanities instruction and the evolving place of humanities in the English classroom. It also provides samples of humanities approaches to English instruction through multidisciplinary connections and thematic units.

What Are the Humanities?

A succinct definition of the humanities has been elusive, and this quality has contributed to the tenuous position of its study. Broadly, the humanities include history, literature, writing, language, philosophy, and music and the arts. What unites these fields—in the sense of a larger discipline or an interdisciplinary course—is the impact of culture upon them and the ways in which the fields influence each other (Finn, Ravitch, and Roberts 1985). Ladner (1984) notes that "the primary task of those who teach the humanities is now to identify the common ground on which persons can gather in order to make responsible judgments about the quality of life in our world in light of the traditions of the past and the competing demands of the future."

Are the Humanities Really in Trouble?

Whether the humanities are regarded as a single "humanities" class or as a group of different disciplines, emphasis on the humanities in the curriculum has decreased in favor of emphasis on math, science, and minimum competency in composition, removed from creative expression or thoughtful exploration of humanities issues. According to the National Commission on Excellence in Education, from 1969 to 1981 the percentage of total high school credits taken as humanities courses declined. Credits in Western civilization are down 50 percent; in U.S. history, down 20 percent; and in U.S. government, down 70 percent. In the face of declining enrollments, many schools have dropped humanities courses from the curriculum altogether (Bennett 1984).

Elliot Eisner (1984) examines six reasons for the decline of the humanities in our schools: (1) a positivistic attitude toward education that looks with suspicion upon forms of understanding that rely upon judgment, intuition, metaphor, and other nonquantitative forms of the exchange between teacher and student and between student and subject matter; (2) a preoccupation with measurable achievement of prespecified outcomes; (3) the influence of a practical public which often finds it difficult to understand why the "impractical" humanities should be given serious attention in the public schools; (4) educators' concern with time as a commodity reserved for sciences and other practical disciplines; (5) the idea that schooling is or should be an enterprise free of values, designed to teach children to think, but not to become critical of the status quo; and (6) lack of an effective professional constituency, since teachers of each of the humanities fields give their first allegiance to their primary discipline.

What Is the Role of the Humanities in the English Classroom?

Still a staple in high schools in spite of curricular upheaval, English is an essential subject of the humanities. Literature and writing are products of the culture and history from which they spring, embodying that heritage for later generations. A typical literature curriculum explores many of the dimensions encompassed by the humanities: the purpose for human existence and what human characteristics and beliefs are of value (Bennett 1984; Finn, Ravitch, and Fancher 1984). According to Fancher (1984), "the English program, more than any other, is charged with stewardship of education for the sake of 'humanity.' Certainly it possesses the richest resources for exercising this stewardship. . . . Knowledge of human character and of social facts and patterns is to be gained in English classes, principally through the study of literature, in far greater degree, diversity, depth, and detail than in any other high school course."

How Are Multidisciplinary Techniques Used to Incorporate the Humanities into English Instruction?

English instructors can place the works of literature suited for the high school classroom in a cultural context by incorporating into the coursework the music, art, history, religion, social customs, and attitudes of each work's respective period in history (Holbrook 1985). This can be accomplished in several ways. For example, Baker (1985) connects literature to art by assigning analysis of a classic literary work along with analysis of a related painting selected by the student. Students explore themes and conflicts common to both works and ultimately defend the relationship between the two in an expository essay.

Ulbrich (1985) describes an American literature course that includes both architecture and art. Slides of historically significant architecture are seen as parallel to various styles of writing in American literary history. Also, Ulbrich's unit on music from historical periods can be easily adapted to literature. Numerous artists and musicians whose works can be successfully integrated into English classes are discussed in the "Our Readers Write" section of *English Journal*, November 1985.

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Can a Thematic Approach Be Used to Explore the Humanities in English Classrooms?

Thematic approaches to literature offer an excellent opportunity to focus on the humanities. For example, Ulbrich's senior advanced placement class explores a universal concern of humankind, the concept of evil, through the study of Renaissance art and literature, Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Eliot's "The Hollow Men," the film *Billy Budd, Othello*, and other works.

The role of the humanities in educating for a democracy is a theme suggested by Wood (1985), who provides five specific roles for the humanities and suggests suitable literary works: equality (*Huckleberry Finn*); diversity (*Hard Times, American Dreams: Lost and Found*); self-worth (*The Wizard of Oz*); alternatives (*1984, Brave New World, Lord of the Flies*); and inspirational models (*The Grapes of Wrath, The Plague*).

An even broader array of thematic units can be found in the supplements to "Thematic Units in Teaching English and the Humanities" (Spann and Culp 1977; 1980). Some of these units deal specifically with literature, such as the Jewish experience in American literature, male/female roles in literature and the media, and the exodus theme in black American literature. Other thematic units, such as politics, law and justice, or celebrating life, can also be adapted to literature study.

Summary

The changes in educational focus and funding have given the English classroom a pivotal role in exposing students to a variety of humanistic concerns and in providing them with a synthesis of the separate humanities disciplines. The enrichment of literature and composition common to most English classrooms is perfect fuel for a "study of civilization" focus. As Ulbrich (1985) observes, "Expanding 'English' to mean 'Humanities' has been a touchstone for English classes for decades. Recent renaming should just encourage teachers to add more than they already do."

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